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SUBJECT: CHECHEN REFUGEES RECEIVE TEMPORARY RESIDENCE
PERMITS

¶1. Summary: Georgian Minister of Refugees Giorgi Kheviasvhili marked World Refugee Day on June 20 by distributing temporary residence permits to 600 Chechen refugees living in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. The remainder of the estimated 1,300 refugees living in the Gorge will receive their permits within the next two months. The new temporary residence permits replace older ID cards that simply indicated refugee status, and carry the weight of a full legal document. The permits will be valid for three years and will enable refugees to purchase homes, open bank accounts, and move freely about the country. In addition, the Ministry of Refugees (MRA) has drafted legislation that, if passed, will provide travel documents to all refugees, allowing them to travel to third countries. End Summary.

Permits first step toward integration?

¶2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) protection officer Edina Dziho told Poloff on June 29 that the distribution of temporary residence permits to the Chechen refugees living in Pankisi was an important step and will likely lead to an overall improvement in the refugees' quality of life. She thought that the permits would be the first step toward local integration and full citizenship, but added that she was waiting to see what restrictions the MRA would place on the permits. Unlike earlier refugee cards, she said, the new temporary residence permits are considered full legal documents, allowing refugees to perform everyday tasks, such as opening a bank account, that they were previously prevented from doing. The permits also allow unhindered travel throughout Georgia, whereas in the past, refugees were limited to the Pankisi Gorge and Tbilisi.

¶3. In a separate meeting Irakli Kokaia, Director of the Department of Migration, Refugees, and Repatriation at the Ministry of Refugees, told Poloff that providing refugees with legal documents enabling them to open bank accounts was necessary to facilitate the distribution of state assistance. On January 1, 2007, the Georgian government started providing 14 lari (USD 8.40) a month in assistance to all refugees, but apparently none of the refugees could collect their money because they could not open bank accounts - the funds were only available through a direct account transfer. Once a refugee opens an account, he said, the total accrued amount (from January onward) will be deposited into their account.

Refugee travel documents by 2008

¶4. Kokaia also said that the Ministry of Refugees has drafted legislation on the creation of travel documents for

all refugees living in Georgia. He said the existing Georgian law on refugees contradicts the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, and was therefore rewritten. The documents would adhere to guidelines established by the 1951 Convention, which calls for Contracting (host) States to issue travel documents to refugees living in their territory for the purpose of traveling to a third country. The Ministry hopes to present the law to Parliament by early Fall, he said, with a goal of issuing the first travel documents to refugees by early 2008.

Comment

15. The Ministry's move to provide legal identity papers and travel documents is a long overdue step, bringing Georgian refugee law in compliance with the 1951 Convention (of which Georgia is a signatory) while providing refugees with the means to more fully integrate into Georgian society. The residence permits will allow refugees to travel freely throughout Georgia, providing them access to employment opportunities outside the economically depressed Pankisi Gorge. The presence of Chechen refugees in Pankisi has been a source of tension between Georgia and Russia in the past, with Russia accusing Georgia of harboring "terrorists" just across its border. By permitting refugees to leave Pankisi, the Georgian government can reduce this point of contention between the two countries.

TEFFT